



# Chamber seeks to raise profile

**Betty Beard**

The Arizona Republic

Jan. 31, 2007 12:00 AM

With a new president and help from a professional strategic planner, Ahwatukee's major business advocacy group is engaged in what leaders call major soul searching.

At age 12, the Ahwatukee Foothills Chamber of Commerce wants to figure out what its role should be, how to help its members more and to determine if it should reach out to bigger businesses and more businesses across the freeway, such as Ikea and Intel.

The chamber, which only had about 30 members 12 years ago, has grown to about 600.

"The chamber right now is focused on small businesses in Ahwatukee Foothills, and that is pretty limited," said Mark LaScola, an Ahwatukee resident whose firm, On The Mark, is providing its services free, as its annual community service project.

The company, which began working with the chamber in December, has begun interviewing about 40 chamber members, non-members, community leaders and residents.

Being hidden behind a mountain from the rest of Phoenix, in a community of mostly small businesses, has given the chamber a unique role.

It promotes businesses and networking opportunities like any other chamber. But it's also serves as a focal point for the community, providing information to outsiders, putting on the annual Fourth of July fireworks show and throwing a parade for the Ahwatukee Little League All-Stars last September.

Linda Pastori, who took over Jan. 1 from pioneer director John McComish as the new president and CEO, said, "The chamber is really unique in that we really are the voice of the community. We are part of Phoenix, but in terms of where people come for information in Ahwatukee, they always come to the chamber."

The group also is unusual, she said, because it doubles as a service club. This year it is helping the Rotary Club of North Phoenix organize a benefit event for medical groups that help kids, Arizona Kids Count 2007 in March.

But Pastori said it's time for a review of the chamber's mission and expects all the interviews about the chamber's strengths and weaknesses and the retreat to help provide that.

"We would really like to have a good understanding of what the community thinks we do, who they think we are and its interests in any issues," she said.

She also says the chamber could help pull the community together for discussions on common issues, such as

diversity, education and transportation. The chamber is planning to put one of its board members on the South Mountain Citizen Advisory Committee, so it can join in discussions on the potential South Mountain freeway. The chamber has taken no position on the freeway.

Sandy Blackwell, the new chair of the board, said she would like to see more residents locate their businesses in Ahwatukee, like she did, moving her SnR Designs to Ahwatukee.

"We have hotels, restaurants, everything you need to operate a business," she said. "Our location is no longer in the boondocks."